

SARA WILLS

history('s) re-turns

KLAUS NEUMANN

Refuge Australia: Australia's Humanitarian Record

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I first read this book not long after attending a forum on Temporary Protection Visa holders at the Footscray Community Arts Centre organised by a coalition of community, local government and advocacy groups. The flyer for this event sent out by one of these groups, A Just Australia (a national human rights organisation working for just refugee programs), called for 'a return to an Australia that made people in genuine need feel welcome, safe and able to contribute to the community' in the 'Australian tradition of a fair go'.

I have long been puzzled by such rhetoric. Even the most cursory reading of Australia's immigration history should suggest that it is no easy matter to find a sufficiently 'welcome' and 'safe' moment to which to 'return'. While I understand in part the possible strategic function of such appeals to nation and history, surely we need to question the efficacy of deploying simplified versions of our past. 2001 ought to have taught us this when, after Tampa, we were told by our then Immigration Minister that 'Australia has a very proud record ... of assisting people in great humanitarian need', and that it is 'vital that unfounded and patently incorrect claims are not used to form judgments that erode the pride we as a nation are entitled to feel about the hand we extend to those in such great need'.¹ Even in a post-Tampa, post-children overboard, post-Woomera, post-Habib Wahedy, post-(insert any of the disgraceful turns for the worse that have occurred in the Howard-Ruddock era of border disorder) Australia, invoking a normative national standard of 'welcome' and 'safety' appears to be merely another chapter in the

crisis-management of representation of the liberal nation-state. Arousing and arranging our memories to suit a (white) nation's psychic needs returns us only, as others have argued, to the realm of fantasy.

This is why we need more books like Klaus Neumann's *Refuge Australia* (and let us hope his promised extended research on refugee history and policy is with us soon), books that question the rhetorical use of the past in the present and our recurring attempts to reduce history to order. One key strength of this work is Neumann's premise that '[h]istories that quarry the past merely to establish genealogies suited for political point-scoring tend to lack complexity and have little analytical value'. (10) While Neumann admits his investigation is 'not disinterested', he has produced nevertheless a work that enables us to assess Australia's humanitarian record from an intelligent, informed and above all refreshing perspective.

In some respects, this is no mean feat. So much has been written about refugee and asylum seeker issues in Australia over the last few years that a new perspective has often been hard to achieve. Yet this book engages the reader from the start in a striking manner. Neumann begins his book with three refugee stories that appear very familiar in a post-Tampa climate. He relates, for example, the case of a 'small band of refugees—six men, sixteen women and 34 children—[who] had finally reached Australian territory':

They tried to justify their illegal entry to the government official interviewing them. One day, soldiers had come to their village,

killed a young man, burned down their houses, destroyed their food gardens and killed their livestock. They had been accused of assisting dissidents, a claim they vehemently denied ... The Australian official thought this information was 'probably true' but was unable to confirm it. Under instructions to remove bogus refugees from Australian territory, the official had sent them back ... (7–8)

Along with this case of the forced removal of a group of people before they could lodge an official claim for asylum, Neumann tells also of a case involving the deportation of an asylum seeker whose claim had been rejected, and of the deportation of a man after his temporary visa had not been renewed.

What is striking about each of these stories is that they all pre-date the current period by at least thirty years, and indicate that Australian responses to refugees, even before the 1990s, were not as generous as many have suggested. Neumann's point is that 'Australia's record of dealing with refugees and asylum seekers does not easily support either the view that current Australian policies are merely a continuation of a previous hard-hearted approach to those seeking our protection, or the argument that they are an aberration within a tradition of generosity'. (10) And it is Neumann's purpose in this work to provide a more complex and informed historical perspective on Australian responses to refugees through examination of the period before 1973, when Australia eventually fell in line with obligations under international law regarding refugees other than

European displaced persons. By examining the period from the late 1930s to the early 1970s, Neumann seeks to 'debunk four assumptions about Australia's responses to refugees and asylum seekers in the past', namely that: '[t]raditionally, Australia has accepted more than its fair share of refugees from around the world'; 'Australia did not have to deal with onshore asylum seekers until the arrival of the first Indochinese boat people in 1976'; 'Australia has always supported international legal instruments for the protection of refugees and worked closely with the UNHCR to alleviate the suffering of refugees across the globe'; and '[t]he forcible repatriation of refugees and the granting of temporary protection visas are measures introduced by the Howard government in response to the arrival of boat people in the late 1990s'. (13) Certainly the seven chapters that follow—examining the treatment of Jewish refugees in the late 1930s, the post-war Displaced Persons resettlement program, non-Europeans barred under policies of White Australia, requests for political asylum in the Cold War era, the case of West Papuan refugees, Australia's support for the UNHCR, and the issue of temporary protection and subsequent deportation—all draw on original research and fulfil Neumann's aim to begin to fill a gap in scholarship and provide 'histories that have integrity'. (14)

Neumann's specific chapters are all well researched, eminently readable and in many respects much more than 'briefings' (this title appears in the 'Briefings' series of topical books exploring social, political and cultural issues in contemporary Australia). Yet, while important

in their own right, it is the context provided by Neumann's arguments about the use of such histories that are in the end most informative. In a period of what often seems an ultimately self-interested, circular and thus somewhat redundant 'history war', Neumann's practice and reflections offer reasons to carry on with forms of historical research that move beyond the impasse of recent debates. These reflections, summarised in the conclusion to *Refuge Australia*, culminate in the proposition of six reasons for the usefulness of a history such as the one presented, and they are worth citing here.

First, Neumann argues, 'a history attuned to the complexities of the past' enables us 'to criticise the present on its own terms (rather than in terms of supposed genealogies which only ever allow the past to have one outcome)'. (107) Second, Neumann proposes that 'a critical and nuanced history' prompts us 'to question the function of the past's rhetorical use in the present', citing his own wariness, for example, 'of arguments that rely on a strong emotional identification with the nation—not least because such identification has historically provided a sound base for anti-alienism and collective egotism'. (108) Third, Neumann points to the way in which understanding the legacy of the past in the present ('distinct from a genealogical interest ... that takes the present as its point of departure') enables us to recognise and question, in this instance, a 'culture of control' that has seen refugee policy formulated in the context of immigration policy (a major criticism emerging from Neumann's work). (108) Fourth, Neumann contends that an

understanding of that history can prompt us 'not to take the present as given', leading to a fifth argument that 'the appreciation of a past that is markedly different from the present may allow us to imagine solutions beyond the straight-jacket of the status quo'. (108–9) And sixth, Neumann suggests that history may offer a way of addressing complex issues 'routinely put in the too-hard basket', and proceeds to outline how many of the objections to dealing with refugees more generously in Australia today seem more problematic when framed within broader historical contexts. (110) None of this is as simple as saying that 'history shows us ...' It demonstrates instead more profound and ultimately rewarding and helpful possibilities.

It's interesting to find at the end of *Refuge Australia* an acknowledgement that the book was first conceived as an essay for A Just Australia, the group whose flyer I cited at the start of this review. Thus it seems in some respects that what Neumann has provided is the response of a thoughtful contrarian, not afraid to explore fully history's returns, even when they seem to turn away from the political purpose of those to whom, in other contexts, the author may be allied. As such I was reminded in the end of the injunction of a historian from another era. In 1915 Carl Becker asserted that 'by liberalizing the mind, by deepening the sympathies, by fortifying the will, history enables us to control, not society, but ourselves, a much more important thing; it prepares us to live more humanely in the present and to meet rather than to foretell the future'.² Arguing for a division of immigration and refugee policy so that it can be guided by humanitarianism

rather than national self-interest, and asserting at the end the importance of 'an individual's responsibility as a citizen of a globalised world' (as opposed to government policies), Neumann's work deeply enriches the possibilities for meetings with history and the future, suggesting that a just Australia is ultimately something to which we should look forward rather than back.

SARA WILLS is an ARC postdoctoral research fellow and lecturer at the Australian Centre, University of Melbourne.

1. Philip Ruddock, *Sunday Age*, 13 January 2002.
2. Carl Becker, *Dial* 59, 2 September 1915, p. 148.